

**Government Administration and Elections Committee**

**March 6, 2023**

**Senate Bill 1157: AN ACT CONCERNING REVISIONS TO THE  
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT CONCERNING EMPLOYEES OF PUBLIC AGENCIES  
- Support**

Senator Flexer, Representative Blumenthal, Senator Sampson, Representative Mastrofrancesco, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

My name is Pamela Armstrong and I am a State of Connecticut Social Security Disability Claims Specialist in the Disability Determination Services unit (DDS) in the Department of Aging and Disability Services with over fourteen years of service. I offer the following testimony in support of Senate Bill 1157: An Act Concerning Revisions to the Freedom of Information Act Concerning Employees of Public Agencies:

I first would like to thank the committee for raising SB 1157. This is a bill that is very important to me and the other workers covered by the expansion of the residential address exemption in the bill. As state employees, we are dedicated to working for the people of Connecticut, but do not want to jeopardize our own personal safety or the safety of our families or our co-workers because of potential abuses of the FOIA process.

In my job as a Disability Claims Specialist, I make Social Security Disability Determinations for residents of Connecticut. It is my job to apply Social Security guidelines to determine if a claimant is found to be “disabled” and unable to work substantial gainful activity, or “not disabled” and capable of performing substantial gainful activity, even if a severe mental or physical impairment has been established. While there is a team of doctors, psychological specialists, and others who assist with this process, it is the disability claims examiner who manages the claim, interacts with the claimant, and ultimately makes the determination to allow or deny claimant’s social security benefits which, for the most part, include monthly disability income payments and medical coverage.

At Disability Determination Services, when we close a case, we can check a box to refer our claimants to the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services because some claimants really want to go back to work even though they have severe physical or mental disabilities. The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services Vocational Counselors help people with disabilities find jobs. Anyone old enough to work who has a disability can apply for BRS services. Through BRS, consumers go through an eligibility process and a process to determine what services are required to help them achieve and maintain career success and substantial gainful activity, and they are placed into jobs. BRS counselors interact with consumers through phone interactions, Zoom video calls, and in person meetings.

My work as a Disability Claims Specialist is important because disability payments and medical benefits serve as a lifeline for disabled people who are not able to work enabling them to support themselves and their families to pay for essentials such as housing, food, and clothing and educational needs.

BRS Vocational Counselors, who are also covered by SB 1157, are important because, thanks to their work, many people who have disabilities are able to find career success, earn a living wage, purchase goods and services, pay taxes, and can make financial decisions that reflect the lives they want to live based on the values they hold dear.

Anybody at any time can find themselves with disabling impairments. This is true across all age groups, all ethnicities, all income, and education levels and in all career paths. Not one of us knows if we will suffer from a severe medical condition such as cancer, heart disease, or stroke. Motor vehicle accidents happen every day. Not one of us knows if we will experience a disabling mental health condition from past or future trauma.

At Social Security Disability Determination Services, we allow and deny claimants disability benefits based on Social Security Guidelines. We deny far more claims than we allow; it is not easy to qualify for disability benefits as the Social Security Rules are very strict. When we deny a claimant's benefits, the claimant can become very angry, and at times they can become threatening to disability claims examiners, because the disability examiner is the person who they have been in contact with throughout the disability claim process. Similarly, at BRS when a claimant doesn't get a job as quickly as they want or if they get frustrated with the process, they can become angry and threatening to the BRS vocational counselors.

I would like to tell you about some of the claimants who I have worked with at Disability Determination Services. My experiences are not unique at DDS. We work with the public and people who have physical and mental health impairments. I had to deny benefits for many of the claimants that I am describing below. While many of the cases sound severe, and they are, the claimants often did not meet the criteria necessary to be allowed disability benefits.

I have worked on many pre-release prison cases from the Department of Correction and pre-release cases for claimants at Whiting Forensic maximum security mental health facility. A few years ago I had four convicted murderers on my caseload at the same time, each had been recently released from prison.

I have worked with claimants who were physically banned from in person visits to Social Security offices throughout the country due to threatening and violent behaviors. I had a case where records documented that when the claimant was incarcerated he would seek attention or express his displeasure with the prison staff by setting fires in his prison cell, the records documented at least 30 fires.

I have had cases of convicted sex offenders and pedophiles who could not be trusted to ride public transportation due to continued inappropriate behavior after release from prison. I had a case where I had to cancel a consultative mental status exam appointment because it was scheduled with a woman and the male claimant had a history of violent assaults against women. I had a case where the claimant could not control impulses to expose himself in public. I had a case where I sent a claimant for a consultative exam but the exam had to be ended because the doctor feared for his life. The claimant made several threatening remarks to the doctor and had a documented history of violent assaults in the past. I had a case where the claimant assaulted his own treating doctor, then he went to speak to his disability attorney representing him for his

disability claim, and he assaulted the attorney. I have had many cases where claimants suffering from paranoid delusions have expressed their belief that the government is trying to kill them, they believe they are being watched, they believe their televisions and radios are sending the government information about them.

I even had a claimant send drawings of satanic winged creatures for his claim.

For me, my family, and my co-workers, I do not want any of these people to be able to misuse the FOIA process to find residential address information.

While it is true that personal information can be found in places other than a FOIA release - as we all know, sometimes all it takes is an internet search - that should not be an excuse for the state to help facilitate the release of that information. The open and transparent operation of state agencies is essential to our democracy and at the foundation of the idea of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. However, that does not mean my home address needs to be accessible through a FOIA request. For my safety and security, as well as the safety and security of my family and co-workers, I urge you to support Senate Bill 1157.

I also encourage committee members to read the submitted written testimony from my co-workers, Stephaine Darden-Smith (who works in a Disability Claims Specialist in the Disability Determination Services unit) and Latarsha Johnson (who works as a Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist in the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services).

Thank you for hearing my testimony and listening to the concerns of my co-workers and me.

Pamela Armstrong